

Not Just Another Day on the Job

Being a CRFS fisheries technician is hard work— but Stephanie White wouldn't trade it for anything

by Ed Roberts, Marine Biologist



CRFS sampler Stephanie White interviews an angler aboard the Sport King. photo by E. Roberts

On a wonderful spring day in May, Stephanie White receives an assignment to sample a three-quarter-day fishing trip aboard the *Sport King* out of San Pedro. Stephanie is one of over 30 Fisheries Technicians (known as *fish techs*) and biologists working with the California Department of Fish and Game collecting biological data, fishery information, and demographics from saltwater sport fishermen as part of the California Recreational Fisheries Survey (CRFS). Fishery managers use the data to manage and monitor the state's marine recreational fisheries.

As the boat leaves the dock, she begins introducing herself: "Sorry to interrupt you while you're rigging up, my name is Stephanie and I'm conducting a survey on behalf of the California Department of Fish and Game, and I'd like to ask you a few questions..." Before the boat reaches the fishing grounds, she'll have asked about the species the angler intends to target, how often the angler fishes, residence information, and other demographics. This information, along with the catch data she'll collect throughout the trip, will be used in conjunction with other data to produce an estimate of total marine recreational catch and fishing effort.

During the course of these interviews, she's often asked if she's a student, or a volunteer. "No," she replies, "this is my full time job." In fact, like many other CRFS fish techs, Stephanie has already completed her education – she holds a Masters degree in marine biology – and is working in the career field of her choice. The protocols to collect statistically valid data are complicated and demanding; CRFS fish techs are a group of highly-trained and dedicated professionals.

Another comment she often hears is something along the lines of "Wow, you've got a great job." "Yes, I do," is her response. "I'm outside and at a different location every day, dealing with people that are excited about what they're doing (fishing), and get to work on or near the ocean." What's not to like?

Stephanie spends time educating the angling public about sport fishing regulations and the importance of the survey, as the boat motors northwest towards Rocky Point on the Palos Verdes Peninsula. During the course of a typical day, she'll interact with dozens of fishermen, and answer several questions from each. Today is no different, as several anglers ask about the current lingcod regulations. "Yes, last year the size limit did increase to 30 inches, but new scientific information showed that the higher size limit was no longer needed, so it was reduced back to 24 inches this year," Stephanie explains.

An elderly angler approaches her, and tells her that he's been interviewed four times this year. "And I've cooperated each time, ever since I saw how hard you samplers work, when I was on a trip aboard the *Sea Angler*. We were fishing sanddabs that day, and I'll tell you, that sampler weighed and measured most of the hundreds of 'dabs we caught, in fairly rough seas, too." Stephanie thanks the gentleman for his cooperation, grateful that the majority of the people she deals with are pleasant and happy to see her, or at least not openly hostile. Fish techs do encounter individuals that are not so pleasant to deal with, from time to time. When this happens, Stephanie does her best to calmly address the issues raised by the irate angler. Often, she's successful in helping the person to understand the reasons behind regulations and the fishery management process; occasionally, she has to turn and walk away.

As the boat nears the fishing grounds, Stephanie gets her data collection forms in order, and slathers on the sunscreen. The sun is shining and the seas are calm, but working conditions are not always this idyllic for her, even in southern California. She's measured 30-pound albacore

in twelve foot seas, been spined by venomous scorpionfish, and carried heavy gear down hiking trails to interview anglers fishing in the surf at remote beaches. Wherever and whenever people are fishing

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photo by E. Roberts

in the ocean, a CRFS fish tech is expected to endure the same conditions as the anglers.

As fishing begins, Stephanie makes observations on the catch rate, the species composition of the catch, and the fishing location and conditions. She also collects biological information from fish that the anglers do not keep. A nice vermilion rockfish is brought aboard, and the deckhand places the fish in the angler's burlap sack hung on the central live bait tank. She notes the catch on her species composition form, and will collect biological data about the fish at the end of the day.

Each time the boat pulls anchor and moves to a new location, Stephanie notes the location and gets the depth and temperature readings from Captain Bruce Root. She answers questions on fish identification, talks more about sport fishing regulations, and helps an angler to remove a scorpionfish from his hook. She even finds time to order and eat a cheeseburger from the boat's galley, all the while making her observations and recording her data.

As the fishing day draws to a close, Stephanie coordinates with the deckhand, Danny Walter, to collect the rest of the data she needs to complete the survey. She works fast— while the data she's collecting is important, she doesn't want to inconvenience the deckhand by slowing him up as he starts to fillet the catch on the way back to the dock. She carefully measures and weighs each fish, and records these measurements on the angler's interview form. It takes

coordination to do this on a gently rolling boat, while avoiding the backcast of an angler lobbing a heavy iron jig with a wicked treble hook, hoping to catch one last barracuda.

While measuring and recording data, Stephanie notices that an angler is over-limit— he's got three bocaccio (a rockfish), and the regulations allow him to possess only one. After she completes her work, she approaches the angler and carefully explains the situation, assuring him that it is not her job, nor the intent of the survey, to enforce fishing regulations. She shows him how to identify bocaccio so that he can avoid similar situations in the future, and suggests distributing the two over-limit bocaccio to passengers who did not catch any, before they reach land. This way, he'll avoid disembarking with too many bocaccio in-hand: a good way to get cited for an over-limit of a protected species. Relieved and reassured, the angler follows her advice, ensuring that the fish won't go to waste.

Stephanie asks each angler a few more questions before the boat reaches the dock and everyone goes their separate ways. As a deckhand secures the bow line, she thanks Captain Root and Deckhand Walter for accommodating her, and debarks with the rest of the passengers, gear in tow. On the way through the parking lot to her car, anglers thank Stephanie for her time and assistance. She smiles in return. It's all in a day's work. 🐟🦑

Answers to the Rockfish Quiz on page 8

1. Copper rockfish, *Sebastes caurinus*. Common names include *chucklehead*, and *whitebelly rockfish*. This fish is often an olive/dark brown/coppery pink color. If the red color had you thinking 'vermillion rockfish', look at the dorsal fin: long spines, deeply incised (compared to a vermillion rockfish), and none of the fins are edged in black, as you often find in the vermillion. According to rockfish authorities, bright-red copper rockfish are common off of California. Daily recreational bag limit: not more than 10 in combination with other RCG Complex* species. Maximum recorded length: 26 in. Range: Gulf of Alaska to Baja California.

2. Honeycomb rockfish, *Sebastes umbrosus*. Common names include *crotch cricket*, and *starry-eye*. The green edging on the scales produces a distinctive honeycomb pattern. Daily recreational bag limit: not more than 10 in combination with other RCG Complex* species. Maximum recorded length: 11.22 in. Range: central California to southern Baja California.

3. Calico rockfish, *Sebastes dalli*. Named after the Smithsonian zoologist William H. Dall. Identified by reddish-brown bars slanting obliquely on a brown or yellowish-green body. The tail shows brown bars that run alongside the fin rays. Daily recreational bag limit:

not more than 10 in combination with other RCG Complex* species. Maximum recorded length: 8 in. Range: San Francisco to central Baja California, more common south of Pt. Arguello.

4. Bocaccio, *Sebastes paucispinis*. Common names include *salmon grouper*, and *mini-grouper*. Young bocaccio are frequently taken in significant numbers off piers in central California. The large mouth extending almost past the eye is one characteristic that identifies this fish as a bocaccio. Daily recreational bag limit - North of 40°10' N. latitude: 2 fish. South of 40°10' N. latitude: 1 fish. Maximum recorded length: 36 in. Range: Alaskan Peninsula to Punta Blanca, Baja California.

5. Olive rockfish, *Sebastes serranoides*. Common names include *johnny bass*, and *jonathon*. This species is often confused with yellowtail rockfish and kelp bass. Olive rockfish may be distinguished by the lack of dark speckling on the sides, and an often more elongate, bass-shaped body. Daily recreational bag limit: not more than 10 in combination with other RCG Complex* species. Maximum recorded length: 24 in. Range: southern Oregon to San Benitos Is., Baja California. 🐟🦑

*RCG Complex: Includes all species of rockfish, cabezon and greenlings